Point Lookout: Andersonville North

SOME 4,000 CONFEDERATE PRISONERS OF WAR DIED IN THE SQUALID CAMP

The future historian who shall undertake to write an unbiased story of the War between the States will be compelled to weigh in the scales of justice all its parts and features; and if the revolting crimes have indeed been committed, the perpetrators must be held accountable. Be they of the South or of the North, they cannot escape history.

—R. Randolph Stevenson:
Preface to "Andersonville"

MARYLAND Route 235 runs southeast into the peninsular toe of Saint Marys county. Near Hollywood, it becomes single-lane, and winds right down to the extreme southern tip of mainland Maryland, at Point Lookout where the currents of the Potomac first collide with the tidal wash of the Chesapeake.

Most always, the waters are placid. Through the mist that often blows in from the Bay, the sound of seagulls can be heard as an occasional yacht or steamer eases by in the distance. Since 1962, Point Lookout has been a state park. In the summer children play on the beaches or dodge sea nettles in the languid surf while picnickers eat around wooden tables.

But a 25-foot-high, white marble monument, as well as occasional artifacts gleaned from the sand, such as lead slugs or bits of parched bones, serve as testimonials to a macabre era in Point Lookout's history. For it is perhaps only these things that remain to remind the visitor that during the Civil War this was the site of one of the most renowned and feared of Union prisoner of war camps; the place where over 4,000 Confederate prisoners of war died at the hands of their Union captors.

"The tale of the camp," writes Edwin W. Beitzell in his book "Point Lookout, Prison Camp for Confederates," "is a horrid story to tell. It is a story of cruel decisions in high places, a story of diarrhea, dysentery, typhoid and typhus, of burning sands and freezing cold in rotten tents. It is a story of senseless shootings by guards. It is a story of the despair and death of 4,000 prisoners, many of whom could have been saved."

"It seemed that nature formed it especially for a prison camp," observed one Confederate prisoner upon his arrival at the point. Another described its sandy confines as "innocent of shrub or tree." Like a tiny version of Florida, the small point tapers into an ever-shifting barrier of sand at the juncture of river and bay, and is attached to the mainland by a small strip of land. The land there is low and marshy, and laced with tidal pools. In fact, 50 per cent of its land mass has been lost to erosion in the last century. It is plagued with mosquitos and extreme heat in the summer, and full exposure to the chills of winter. Another prisoner recounted the capriciousness of the weather on the point:

"The morning was pleasant but toward eavning the air changed, and the nite was very coal. Was so coal that five of our men froze to death befour morning. Was so hungry today that we caught a rat and cooked and ate it . . . The 10th was a nice day . . ."

Long ago the site of minor skirmishes between farmers and Indians, the tract of land that later became the camp fell into government hands in a roundabout way. William Cost Johnson, of Frederick county, who had bought the land in 1857 in hopes of turning it into a resort, fell into financial difficulty, and mortgaged his 400 acres to William Allen of Baltimore. Allen, in turn, offered it to the federal government as a site for a hospital, and in July 1862, the construction of Hammond Military Hospital was begun under the supervition of one Captain Williams.

AFTER the Battle of Gettysburg, July 1-3, 1863, there was a pressing need for a prisoner of war depot. Using old army tents, under the orders of Col. W. Hoffman, commissary general of prisoners, a depot was established near the Hammond Hospital that was capable of holding 10,000 prisoners. In August, the first large contingent had arrived, and by December, there were 9,000 Confederate soldiers captive on Point Lookout's barren shores.

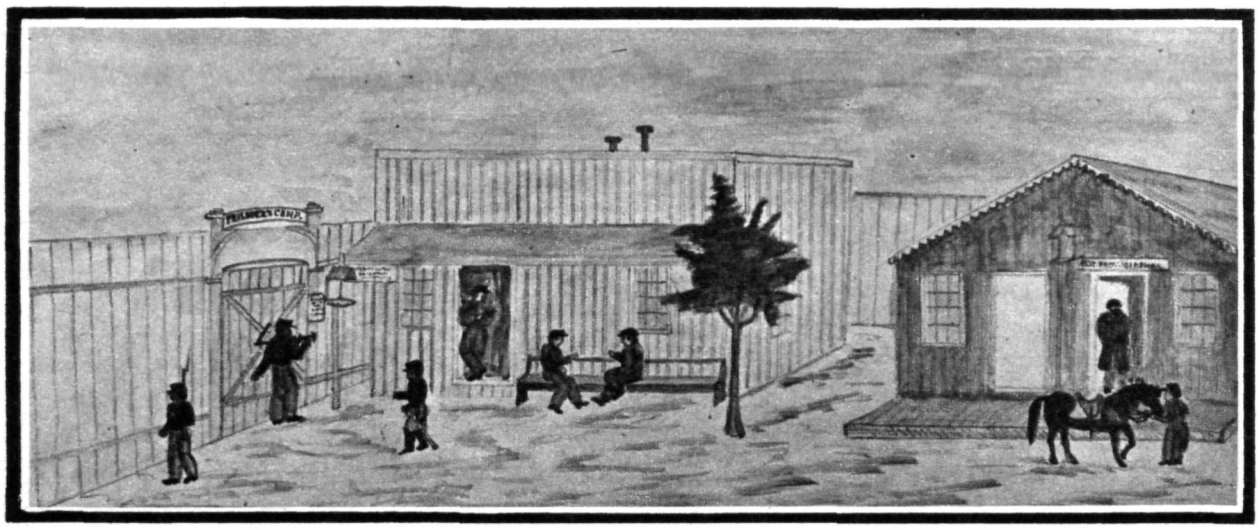
"Thousands of men were imprisoned and dying rapidly," wrote one Confederate when recalling his arrival. "Upon my entry, one of the first things I did was ascertain how many men were dying per day, and to calculate when my time would come, should I live to be the last survivor. The calculation showed I had but a brief time to live."

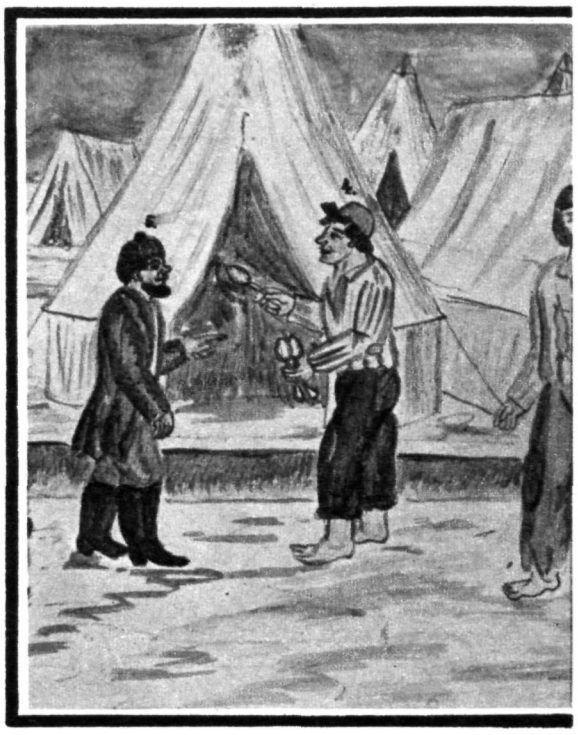
The prison when completed, combined with the facilities of Hammond Hospital, consisted of over 50 buildings, including stables, storehouses, a chapel, an ice house, guard quarters and a lighthouse. The entire compound was cut off from the mainland end of the Point by a 20-foot-wide, 15-foot-deep ditch, which was flooded. Dirt from this ditch, as well as tall planks, were used to build 15-foot-high circular walls around the prison stockade. Around the top of this was a bridgework where guns were mounted and guards could walk. The camp was guarded by four Union regiments, totaling nearly 2,500 men, as well as several batteries of artillery.

The compound itself was laid off neatly with streets and shallow drainage ditches, which were described as being littered with human waste.

In November of 1863, Dr. W. F. Swalm sent a report to Dr. J. H. Douglas, associate secretary of the Federal Sanitary Commission, reporting the deplorable conditions at the camp. There were no stoves, and the sick were in filthy condition, as were the grounds and the quarters. Sometimes, he wrote, three men had to share a single blanket, and suffered greatly from the cold. Chronic diarrhea, scurvy and "itch" were rampant.

A Dr. Montrose A. Pallen made a similar visit and observed, "Many of the men are without the necessary clothing even to hide their nakedness, and during the late cold weather, several absolutely froze to death. . . . More than half of the 9,000 have not even a single blanket for bedding or covering, and sleep on the bare ground."





A single tree lends relief to the sterile backdrop at the entrance to the camp, as portrayed by John Omenhausser, a prisoner whose 46 water-colors of camp life are owned by the Maryland Historical Society. Right, "Here's your coffee," one prisoner says to another.

By BOB ALLEN

Blankets considered surplus by the guards were regularly confiscated, as were men's personal possessions. The stockade's shallow surface wells were contaminated by dysentery, scorbutic taint and human waste. The prisoners' "beach" was so riddled with "the filth of the camp" that it discouraged even the most hardy from bathing. Smallpox was rampant.

FURTHER inspections followed, and many of the reports reached Colonel Hoffman, commissary general of prisoners. He in turn wrote to Captain Marston, one of Point Lookout's commandants, who denied the charges. Colonel Hoffman then wrote to J. H. Douglas of the Sanitary Commission and insisted that Dr. Swalm's report as well as other reports to him had been inaccurate, and should not be published.

A year later, conditions had not been remedied. Blankets and clothing were still in severe shortage. Many prisoners went barefoot. The death rate had risen from less than 2 per cent to more than 5 per cent.

Some requisitions of clothing were lost in the throes of bureaucratic squabbling, or due to the whims of petty officials. Several thousand pairs of surplus blue pants destined for the camp were turned back at the last minute when someone suggested that because of their similarity to the color of the Union uniform, they might aid prisoners in escape attempts.

Much of the camp's miserable condi-

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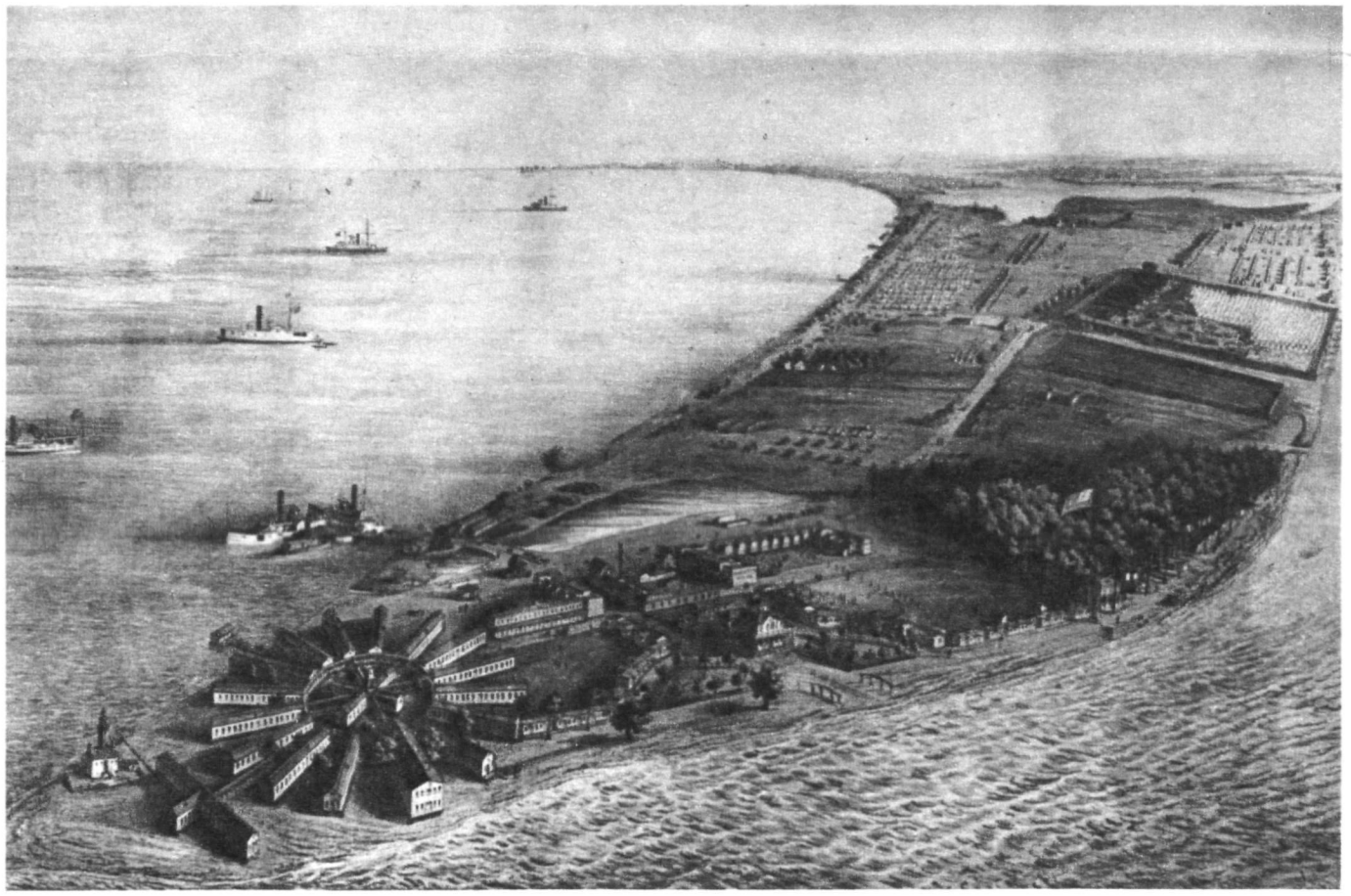
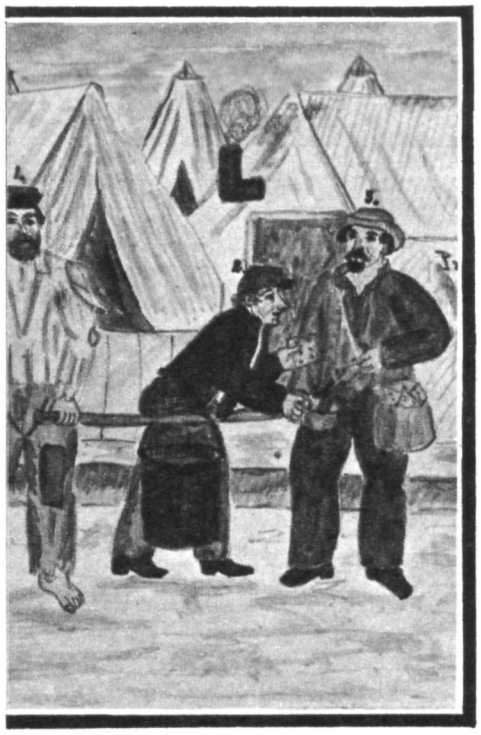
Point Lookout, above, now is a state park, where the Potomac, on the left, flows into the Chesapeake Bay at the tip of St. Marys county. There is little to remind one of its status as a prisoner of war camp near Hammond Military Hospital, below.





Point Lookout Prison Camp

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tion was due to forces larger than bureaucratic indifference. In fact one of greatest factors blamed in postwar investigations was "vindictive directives from high command." Secretary of War Edwin Stanton's harsh "eye for an eye" policy contributed greatly to the state of affairs at Point Lookout. It was his personal order to stop coffee and sugar rations to prisoners when the South failed to supply these commodities to its prisoners of war. It was also he who forbade visitors to the camp, and discouraged efforts for prisoner of war exchange while the South continued to press for them.

"Lack of interest, direction and compassion on the part of the commandants," many of whom surrendered most of the responsibilities of daily maintenance of the camp to their subordinates, was also cited. The camp guards were at the bottom of this chain of command, and many of them were unmitigated in their cruelty. Shootings of prisoners were as frequent as they were wanton and random.

"Usually these shooting cases," recalled the Rev. J. B. Traywick, who was captured in October 1864, "involved men suffering from diarrhea who must go out in the night and relieve themselves, and doing so, become sport for the guards on duty." Men were shot to death for offenses as benign as "crowding" at the gates, or "mouthing" the guards.

In one particular incident, prisoners felled a guard from the parapet with a brick in retaliation for his crueity, killing him. Camp authorities rousted out 32 men in the night, in their "shirts and drawers." They were put in the block house without food, water or heat for 48 hours. When a confession was obtained from men in another part of the camp, and the 32 were released, three had died from exposure.

FOOD was undoubtedly the most sorely inadequate of necessities. Rations were meager, and did little to keep the prisoners from starvation. Mr. Traywick, who lost 65 pounds before his release after a year's captivity, recalled that rations "made for about one meal a day."

C. W. Jones of Martinsburg, W. Va., who spent two years in the Point Lookout Prison stockade, and whose published memoirs are recorded in Edwin W. Beitzell's book (at the Maryland Historical Society), recorded several incidents that dramatized the food situation.

"One occasion when the tide on the bay was high, it brought ashore an old seagull that had been dead a month or more. It was picked up by a hungry rebel and devoured with gusto. I, with others willing to get a meal, gave my pocketknife for a pie which had been seasoned with skimmings from the slop tubs of the cookhouse . . . It gave me a full spell of sickness which came very near to sending me to the 'peach orchard' [graveyard nicknamed after a Gettysburg battlefield] where many men had gone."

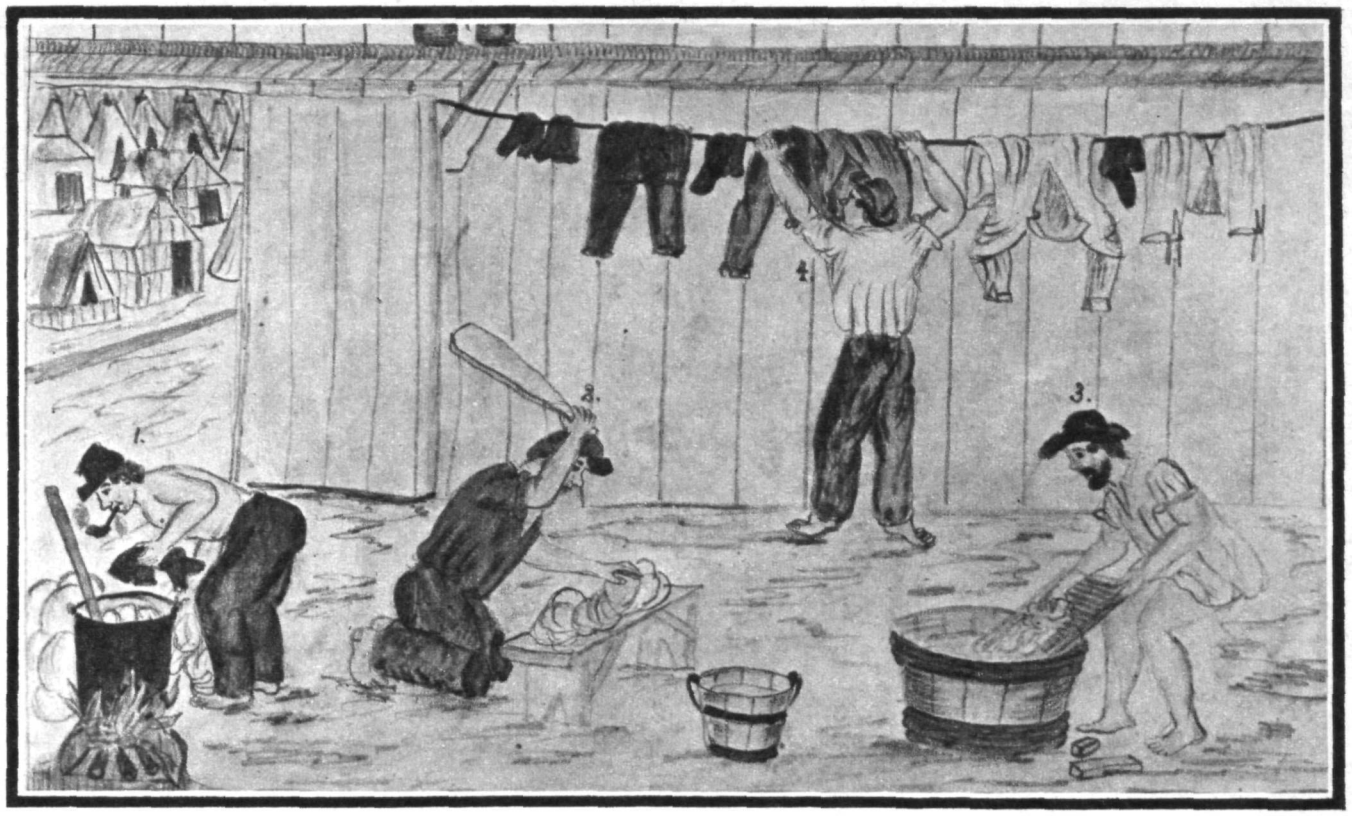
SURPRISINGLY enough, amid these exigencies, many prisoners devised ingenious methods of survival, enabling them to get extra nourishment. An unusual bartering system developed among inmates, and sometimes included cooperative guards who bought rings, fans or other crude wares fashioned by prisoners. One prisoner made sugar molasses while another brewed coffee from stale grounds salvaged from the cookhouse. These goods were traded to other prisoners for crackers. Some fortunate captives were permitted to work on nearby farms. They were paid their keep (about half a cent a day) in tobacco.

Visual depictions of the daily tribulations at Point Lookout are preserved in a series of 46 water-colors by John J. Omenhausser during his imprisonment. Now owned by the Maryland Historical Society, they were reprinted in part in the August 1949 edition of *American Heritage*.

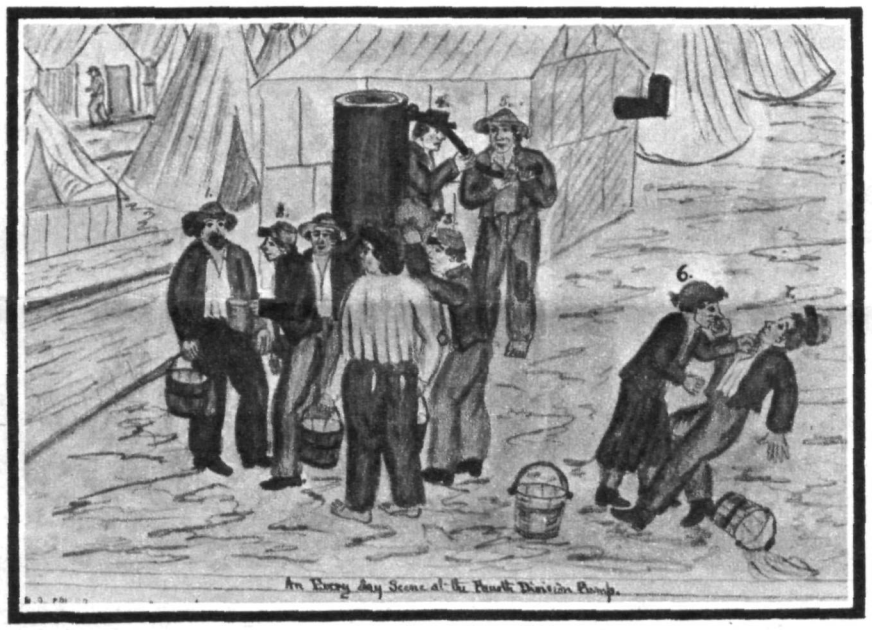
The plight of the Confederate war prisoners did not go unnoticed by the citizens of surrounding St. Marys county, whose leanings were decidedly Confederate. The sordid conditions of the camp could not help but come to their attention, and from the first, they made humanitarian efforts to ease the shortage of prisoners' creature comforts. Their outrage was recorded often in county newspapers, but their efforts to ease the human suffering fell to naught when federal directives were issued forbidding them to furnish clothing or food, or otherwise aid camp inmates.

Rumors and stories of the Point Lookout Prison Camp's foul reputation soon spread to the deepest reaches of the Confederacy. Gen. Robert E. Lee, under the advice and recommendation of President Jefferson Davis, made plans to liberate the infamous stockade, and until the end of the war, he never abandoned them. Finally, in July, 1864, an attempt was made, but was thwarted by strategic complications long before reaching St. Marys county.

By the end of the Civil War, more than 20,000 prisoners, twice the number it was designed for, were kept in the stockade. Commissary General Hoffman had plans to send even more. The mortality rate continued to rise until prisoner deaths were occurring at the rate of 60 to 65 a day. The overall death rate rose to an appalling 25 per cent, overtaking that of the notorious camp at Andersonville which never went above



Omenhausser water-color, right, depicts prisoners washing their clothes, intent to rid them of "greybacks" or lice. Below, "An Everyday Scene at the Pump," with men fighting to get a cup of water.



24 per cent. (Both were outshadowed by the 44 per cent mortality rate at the Union prison in Elmira, N.Y.)

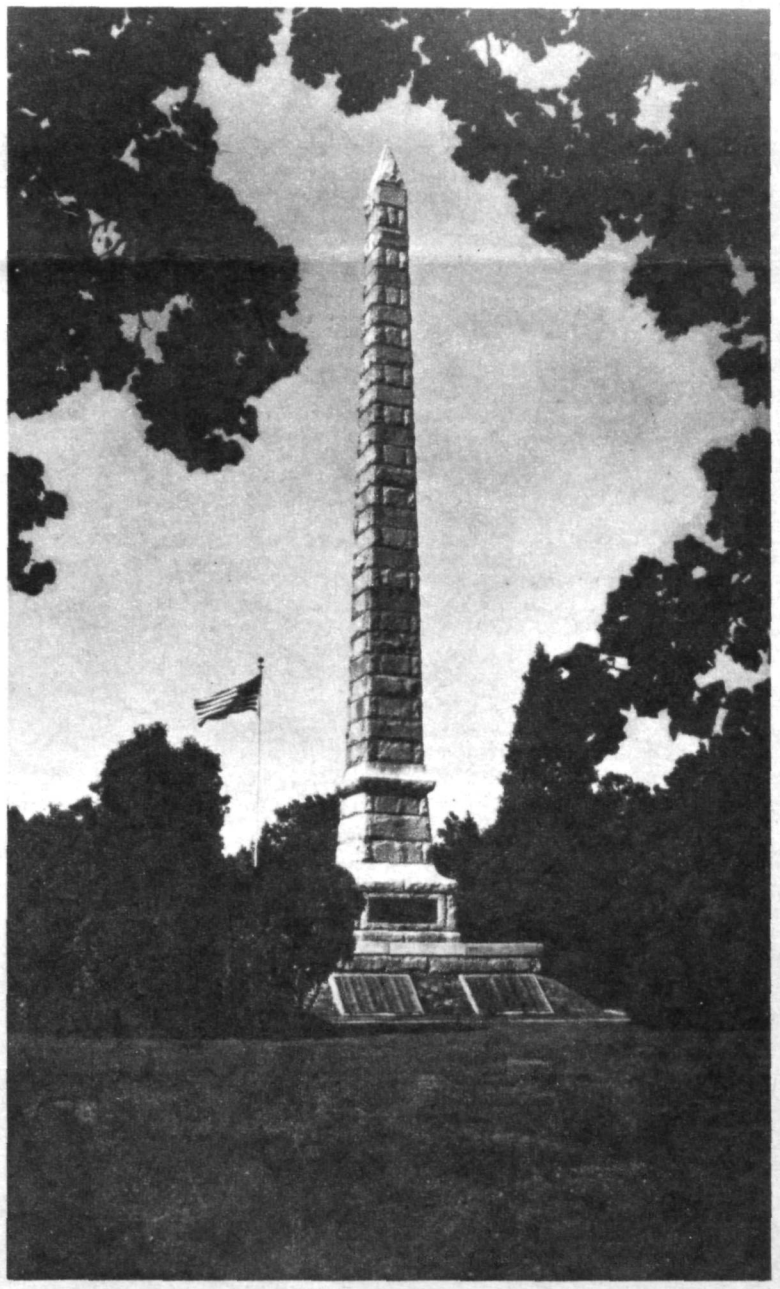
When the Civil War ended, and prisoners were paroled en masse, insult was added to injury when some were forced to wait as long as three days without food for transport to their homeland. When final rosters were calculated against hospital records and sketchy prison logs, the official death toll for Point Lookout stood at 3,553 but realistic estimates by historians run higher.

ALMOST a year after the war, steps were begun to establish a national cemetery at the Point. For some years afterward, memories of the horrors of the camp at Point Lookout remained vivid in the minds of many, and the site remained deserted. But after most of the dead had been disinterred and reburied at an official site at nearby Tanner Creek, a large hotel that had stood on the Point was reopened, and the merriment of resort life was resumed.

In 1878, the hotel burned down, and soon after a Coast Guard station was erected. The low, marshy condition of the land, however, as well as the frequency of floods and abundance of mosquitos, discouraged much development until the state of Maryland purchased the land almost a century later.

Today at Point Lookout, only one tiny building from the original camp structures remains, and all but the vaguest traces of the earthworks have succumbed to erosion. The 25-foot-high monument erected by the state, and a smaller one purchased by the federal government, are the only immediate reminders of this grim era in Point Lookout's history.

"Much has been written about Andersonville almost to the exclusion of all other prison camps both federal and Confederate," observes Edwin W. Beitzell. "The horrors of Andersonville have been re-enacted in a novel and in plays. . . . Every accusation made against Captain Wirz of Andersonville could have been made against those in charge at Point Lookout, only 80 miles south of the scene of the famous Andersonville trial, where 38 or more prisoners were shot without reason and 4,000 lay buried in a camp not yet dismantled." □



A 25-foot white marble monument to the Civil War dead is one reminder of Point Lookout's past; lead slugs occasionally gleaned from the sand are another.